

Myths and Their Murderers: Lorenzo Valla and Arthur Butz

[Jett Rucker](#)

Throughout the Middle Ages and well into the Renaissance, respectable opinion held that Emperor Constantine had, sometime early in the Fourth Century AD, given his sovereignty over Rome and much of Italy to the Christian Pope of his day, Sylvanus, with the intent that this sovereignty should devolve, as time went on, to pope after pope, rather than from emperor to emperor, as it had up to that time (Constantine's imperial successors clung to this sovereignty, allegedly in contravention of this Donation, as it became known). This was, during most of the period in which it reigned, a matter of profound significance to the geopolitical contests of the day, in which popes continued to vie for territorial hegemony in much of Italy.



Lorenzo Valla (1407-1457)
(<https://fineartamerica.com>, photograph by Granger).

The document with which this was purportedly done was a fraud, concocted in the Eighth Century, and a priest named Lorenzo Valla published a book, *De falso credita et ementite Constantiti*, in 1440 that proved this conclusively. Over a century later, long after Valla's death in 1457, his book was placed on the Catholic Church's Index Librorum Prohibitorum, the list of books, issuing forth from the newfangled invention the printing press, that it was a sin to produce, distribute, buy, sell, or read (this fearsome new medium was not a factor in Valla's lifetime) in 1558. The counterfeit nature of the Donation is today subscribed to by the cognizant scholars with at least the unanimity with which climate scientists support the concept of anthropogenic global warming.

The actual death of the Myth of the Donation of Constantine is dated to about 1600, when a prominent Catholic authority declared it a nullity—160 years or more after Valla had done the job insofar as research and commitment to writing are concerned.

Arthur R. Butz^[1], then a professor of electrical engineering at Northwestern University, put the myth of what had only recently then acquired the name "Holocaust" to rest in 1976, when he published, with that damn printing press again, *The Hoax of the Twentieth Century: The Case against the Presumed Extermination of European Jewry*. Butz at the time was 44 years old, while Valla was 33 when his jeremiad came out. Valla at the time was an ordained priest.

It would seem, then, that the definitive work that kills the anointed myth enjoys an initial period of acceptance (or perhaps of being ignored), and thereafter encounters (or engenders) countermeasures, especially if, after the initial assault, new media (the printing press, the Internet) come to the fore with which such "alternate" points of view can gain a hearing that was once denied them.

Valla was long dead when his opus made the "enemies list" in 1559. Butz, on the contrary, was very much alive when his work, after being carried for more than 20 years, was struck from Amazon.com's offerings on March 6, 2017. He is, as author of one of the 155 revisionist books delisted by Amazon on that day, a pariah in his own time—41 years after publication, not that he hasn't been abundantly attacked less-effectively throughout that period by the enemies of sound history.

Like Valla's, Butz's work fell victim to (or benefitted from, depending on how you look at it) technological improvements in the dissemination of information subsequent to initial publication. Valla's opus appeared in 1440, some years before the printing press, and spreading literacy, enabled his words to spread farther and faster. The Pauline Index first appeared in 1559, after the printing press and its products—books, newspapers, pamphlets, etc.—had diffused to a considerable extent, and Valla's work [made the cut](#)^[2]. Butz's work made it onto the Amazon bandwagon safely enough (Amazon started up in 1994), but its (downloadable) Kindle edition came along around the time of what might be deemed the Holocaust's current "supernova" period beginning perhaps around 1992, when Germany enacted its first law criminalizing Holocaust denial, and it all got to be too much for those institutions, such as the Yad Vashem Holocaust Memorial and Museum, and the Index of the Twenty-First Century finally came crashing down.

Yes, history does not repeat itself, but it sure as hell rhymes. Valla was a priest, and had no apparent wife or children. Butz likewise seems to be quite innocent of such relations, a condition common among people who challenge entrenched social mores. Both authors wrote their books before the lists (the Index and Amazon, respectively) came out, and both got their books on the lists (automatically). But the lists, of course, were opposite: the Index was a black list (don't buy/read this) and Amazon is now,

whatever it was initially, a white list (you may buy/read these). The sales of Valla's book aren't known, neither before nor after its listing, and the sales of Butz's book before and after its first listing on Amazon aren't known to me even if they are to Butz or someone else.

But the occasion for this article is the eventual removal of Butz's book from the list that was once (still?) reputed to contain "every" book. It seems safe to assume that a low level of sales was succeeded on March 6, 2017 by a still-lower level of sales, hardly uncommon for a book in its 42nd year of publication (and its fourth edition). Valla's book, for its part, is not only still in print (at least in English and German translations), but proudly offered for sale on ... [Amazon!](#) There's nothing against heresy in Amazon's choices (and they are now very much choices) of what to sell; it's just that some heresies aren't allowed (anymore). Maybe the older ones that have finally won the day are OK. The ones still struggling ... well, which way is the political wind blowing?

Valla and Butz were both important intellectual figures entirely aside from their heretical writings. Valla was a leading scholar of ancient Greek and Latin and a master of Latin grammar who may never since have been overtopped by any later generation. Butz's contributions lie in a field far removed from any at issue in the present contemplations, something I would like in my ignorance to call "computational electronics." Whether their heretical writings here discussed constituted the crowning, or most-significant accomplishments of their lives would be something for each of their admirers (and detractors) to decide for themselves. It is clear that Butz went on teaching electrical engineering at Northwestern University until his retirement, and that the *Hoax* did not visibly dominate his life during that time. As to Valla, a number of his works postdate *de falso credita*, so it would appear that his own contribution, as in Butz's case, did not quite take over his career or brief remaining life after its creation.

So Valla's book enjoyed, if only from neglect by the authorities, acceptability at least until such time as it was set in type and printed and/or translated into the rising vernacular languages in Europe (Valla died during this period). Then it was blacklisted, then it might have been taken off the blacklist at some point, and it had become the forerunner of dominant opinion by 1600 or so. Butz's book seems to have enjoyed some favorable notoriety along with the unfavorable type to be expected, and Butz addressed several annual conferences of the Institute for Historical Review in the early to mid Eighties. While Butz's book had the stage for revisionist books (again, in English) virtually to itself for its first decade or two, the subsequent appearance of dozens upon dozens of new books and translations of older books have still not dislodged it from its place of pride at the head of the list of scholarly books on the Holocaust. If mere quality and extent of scholarship really mattered in the impact such works have, the Holocaust legend would not have survived past 1980.

As it is, of course, the Holocaust is very much alive today in 2018 and enjoying the rudest of health, thank you very much, protected by both censorship and criminal penalties against disputation in twenty countries or more. Arthur Butz today is 84 years old. He is probably resigned to the fate that befell his predecessor of the Sixteenth Century, of dying before the ultimate demise of the monster he so early found and so valiantly took on. But we will prevail, and on that happy day, if I should still be alive, I know I will be far from alone in remembering Arthur Butz's signal deed.

Someday, very quietly I am sure, Butz's book will be taken up once again by Amazon. I wonder if they're saving the hundreds of reviews and ratings received by the past incarnation of the title on their august pages, to restore when that inevitable day comes. Most likely, at the time of this anticipated event, people will care much less than they do now about the Holocaust whether they believe in it, decline to

believe, or have never even heard of it. By that time, people may not care very much about Amazon's whitelist of books, either.

Pope Paul VI abolished the Index Librorum Prohibitorum in 1966. The act received little note.

[1] I am indebted to Dr. Butz for describing the case of the Donation of Constantine and the roles of Lorenzo Valla and others at some length in his magnum opus. I had previously been aware of none of it, but I could say the same for his landmark revelations concerning the Holocaust, quite as well.

[2] The linked-to list is by author name, and the author in question is listed under the letter "L" as Laurentij Vallæ.

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